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Development, Topography, and Identity: The Dougherty Valley and the New Suburban Metropolis

René Davids



Much current debate about public space in the United States expresses a generalized disillusionment about our built environment, based on a widely shared belief that vast conurbations are developing that look alike from one region to the next: characterless low-density sprawls with few, if any, regional attributes. Distinctive responses to climatic and cultural imperatives, such as the Southern veranda, have all but disappeared from new construction, as air-conditioning and television have made sitting outside to view the street or catch a breeze a thing of the past. Even topographical features are now eliminated, as hills are flattened and creeks covered over to more easily accommodate large residential subdivisions. Urban theorists have developed a specialized vocabulary to designate these environments, variously calling them

“global,” “un-geographic,” “generic” cities, or “urban fields.”¹

While these beliefs are not wholly without substance, they are frequently unspecific and lack historical context: they refer to any town, anywhere. As a counterbalance, this essay examines the Dougherty Valley, a newly developed area in Northern California that makes a case for more detailed and critical observation. As the projects there indicate, the planning and design of new residential subdivisions in California today is often more considerate of topography and ecological imperatives than was the case even two decades ago. Some of these projects are also distinguished from their predecessors by their greater densities, sense of identity, and opportunities for social exchange. While they may still be unsatisfying in many respects, it is important to examine the significant progress they represent.

Defining Identity

A generation ago, Kevin Lynch was the most prominent of the urban theorists who reacted with alarm at the perceived disappearance of distinctive characteristics from the contemporary city. However, Lynch defined identity in primarily physical terms as the quality that makes cities recognizable, memorable, vivid, engaging of attention, and differentiated from other locations.² In pursuit of a coherent environmental image, he overlooked the fragmentary character of modern society and the cultural, socially constructed, time-based, and experiential relativity of identity.

It is now widely recognized that many factors help define urban identity. Among these are ethnicity (Little Saigon in Orange County, California); social orientation (the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco); demog-

raphy (senior citizens in Sun City, Arizona); history (the Point Loma neighborhood in San Diego, home to many retired military personnel); even successful marketing (reconstitution of Chinatowns in many California cities).

As a result of his lack of attention to these factors, Lynch's conclusions have lost some of their original relevance. But his methodology, based on the observation of real places in actual cities, has not. And today most urbanists continue to deplore the proliferation of cities without character.³

There are exceptions, of course. The architect Rem Koolhaas has argued that the stronger the physical identity of a city, the more "it resists expansion, interpretation, renewal and contradiction."⁴ He has instead advocated what he calls the "generic city," an entity haunted neither by its past nor its position in the World Heritage rankings. Koolhaas's embrace of the contemporary city is refreshing. But his "generic city" is no city in particular—merely an image concocted from his experiences in various cities around the world. Thus, he describes the contemporary urban landscape as uniformly "generic," or a "homogeneous field," when in fact individual cities are at best only superficially similar.

Some uniformity or predictability in the urban landscape does not by itself lead to an environment without character. The grid plan recommended by the "Laws of the Indies" for adoption throughout Spanish-colonial America, for example, was intended to create cities with more or less uniform layouts. But, in practice, the variety of topographic settings in which these settlements occurred produced varied urban environments.

Another useful example is provided by the repetitive monotony of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century housing terraces in London. In this



case, uniformity was in part relieved by the semi-private greens which they surrounded. Such greens also provided a green lung to cleanse the polluted air of rapidly industrializing cities.

Eventually, the concept of the communal garden as a distinguishing design feature was expanded to the scale of an entire town. Most famously, in 1902, Ebenezer Howard conceived his "Garden City of Tomorrow," an entire community envisioned as a sunlit, green place, restricted to light industry.

In the United States, Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright proposed additional innovative ways to relate town planning to the natural environment. In their 1929 design for Radburn, New Jersey, these included the separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the use of "super-blocks," and the setting aside of acres of common parkland.

Similar projects based on collective ownership of green spaces were conceived beginning in the early 1960s in Reston, Virginia; Columbia, Maryland; and Peachtree City, Georgia. But these remained isolated

experiments for decades, until increasing political pressure made collective ownership of green spaces a more viable model for real estate development in the U.S.⁵

Development Practices in Northern California

The milestones in the above process of change were key pieces of national environmental legislation passed during the 1970s and 80s.⁶ But in Northern California there already existed a legacy of greenbelt planning from earlier in the twentieth century, and this was frequently combined with a progressive tradition of appropriating open spaces for natural reserves. As a consequence, cities and counties in Northern California had managed to exert considerable influence on the housing industry through local public health ordinances, zoning plans,

Opposite: Parks and open space provide a unifying element in the overall plan of Dougherty Valley.

Above: The Gale Ranch Golf Course respects topographic conditions.

subdivision regulations, and environmental guidelines. State law further provides that cities and counties in California may require “specific” plans to better define development on sites of special interest or value.

By mandating the preservation of native vegetation, creeks, wetlands, landscape features, and animal life, these regulations have ensured that at least some aspects of new residential development in Northern California have been better integrated with surrounding landscapes. And particularly egregious practices, such as the leveling of hills to make way for new subdivisions, once a symbol of all that was wrong with suburban sprawl, have been halted completely. Thus, a combination of legal and statutory changes and grading practices adjusted to topography have helped preserve local character in the context of comparatively dense, relatively homogeneous subdivisions of single-family homes.

Similarities still exist between subdivisions, of course; but most of these are now dictated by considerations such as the need to build as many similar units as possible to maximize land value, increase speed of production, and minimize cost. Developers also need to cast a broad net for potential buyers by providing houses with a strong traditional flavor, designed to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of American taste. This strategy speeds up the pace of sales, thus lowering the cost of financing. The average buyer also still regards the purchase of a house as a major investment, and feels reassured by familiar features that appeal to popular taste.

Moreover, homeowners have a vested interest in being able to sell their biggest asset as quickly as possible. As a result, few major differences exist between house plans in, say,

Georgia and California, other than a marginal variation in external appearance, or in features such as mud rooms or basements. A greater proportion of units in California may derive their expression from Mediterranean traditional styles; and a plantation-style mansion (among other regional styles) has a stronger appeal in the South. But the search for economic opportunity in America depends on mobility, and thus on the existence of comparable residential environments across the country. “The interchangeability, predictability and ordinariness of this urban landscape” offers comfort and security to a mobile population, even if, as critics such as Richard Weinstein have pointed out, it has the potential to undermine the authentic nature of places.⁷

The Dougherty Valley

Despite such standardized house designs, an increasing sensitivity to the relationship between nature and contemporary mass housing can be illustrated by the developments of the Dougherty Valley. The valley is situated between the coastal foothills along the 680 Freeway corridor east of Oakland. Development here began in 1982 with the subdivision called Canyon Lakes. But it is the much larger Dougherty Valley project that has attracted public attention and debate since it was proposed in 1992.

The Dougherty Valley project is located on six thousand acres of unimproved land in an unincorporated area of southwest Contra Costa County that is contiguous with the City of San Ramon and the Town of Danville. Two developers are involved: Shapell Industries and Windermere Ranch Partners BLC (which includes the builders Brookfield Homes, Lennar Communities, and Centex Homes). The specific plan for the project, ini-

tially approved in 1992, envisioned 11,000 homes for more than 29,000 residents. All nine phases of work (four by Shapell, on the former Gale Ranch, and five by Windermere) have been approved, and build-out is expected in 2015.

Dougherty Valley is intended to provide comfortable residences within a five- to ten-minute drive of San Ramon, the city into which all its phases will be incorporated when complete (doubling the city’s population). Among other nearby employment centers are two suburban business parks.⁸ The project is also within reasonable commuting distance of Silicon Valley; a nearby regional Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station offers access to San Francisco and Oakland; and the entire project area will one day be served by an extensive bus network.

The development is formed of clusters of homes supported by retail and community services so as to conserve surrounding hillsides and ridges on the site as permanent open space.⁹ Indeed, open space constitutes an impressive 59 percent of the total land use in the Dougherty Valley project area. This ratio has been achieved by increasing the density of its residential clusters. A wide variety of single and multifamily housing types are being provided, and many of the single-family houses are planned with zero lot lines. But large parks, recreational facilities, and open-space reserves mitigate the sense of density, conferring an unusual feeling of spaciousness.

Suburbs have traditionally been criticized for comprising only identical single-family houses and fostering homogeneous populations and privatized lives. But the contemporary suburb is actually a complex phenomenon, which includes residents of diverse backgrounds, pockets of public



or semi-public space, and a variety of workplaces. As a reflection of this new reality, plans for Dougherty Valley call for it eventually to include a range of community facilities: neighborhood squares, four elementary schools, two middle schools, a high school, a satellite community-college campus, a community center, a library, a police station, and two commercial centers. Among Dougherty Valley's most innovative features, however, is a network of pedestrian walks, golf-cart paths, and horse and bicycle trails, with benches and pet stations at rest stops.¹⁰

In Dougherty Valley, great emphasis has also been placed on the location and design of public open space, including recreation areas such as a golf course, access to which is available for a nominal fee, and local parks free to anyone wanting to use them. Among these is Coyote Crossing, an unrestricted public green with a toddler playground, soccer and baseball facilities, and picnic tables. The green offers magnificent views of Mt. Diablo, Coyote Creek Canyon, and surrounding residential districts, and it confers a sense of identity rarely associated with tract developments. This distinctiveness is partly the result of

the developers' having met the overall goal throughout Dougherty Valley of relating public open space to existing topographic features. Open space is also considered a linked amenity for all to share, rather than a series of discrete landscape features, such as an artificial lake or a golf course, created for the benefit of a relative few.

Canyon Lakes is contiguous to the west and smaller than the Dougherty Valley development, and was designed and planned in the 1980s by the Dahlin Group. Like its larger neighbor, it includes a golf course as one of several types of open space. In both cases, the golf courses are valued as visual amenities for the houses that overlook them. But the golf course at Dougherty Valley, built twenty years after the one at Canyon Lakes, was designed in deference to existing topographic features and local ecosystems.

Canyon Lakes features beautiful fairways with the usual problems related to water consumption and turf-maintenance chemicals. The golf course at Dougherty Valley, built as environmental awareness was increasing, is a hybrid design that mixes a high-water-use recreational facility with self-sustaining native plant

communities. It aims to require less irrigation and reduce the leeching of chemicals into the water table.¹¹

A little farther east of the golf course at Dougherty Valley, the green zone between branches of Alamo Creek and the foothills demonstrates additional concern for the natural environment. It is being planted with native, drought-tolerant vegetation with the aim of restoring the ecosystem that existed before the valley was cleared for cattle grazing. The creek is also valued as an environmental resource, providing for the retention of storm water, increased water percolation into the soil, and decreased runoff volume. And hillside areas have been left largely untouched, their stability protected by the few existing trees. Such natural reserves provide benefits in terms of microclimate, drainage, and biodiversity. While further improvement

Above left: Creek treatment in an older area of San Ramon.

Above right: The Alamo Creek project in the Windermere Estates section of the Dougherty Valley in 2002 included channel relocation, revegetation, and creation of an off-channel floodplain wetland.



would be desirable from an environmental standpoint, these conservation measures represent a step in the right direction.¹²

Today the prohibitively complex process of securing development permits favors the preservation of existing landscapes in all suburban areas. Any change to a watercourse, in particular, requires not just environmental impact reports but also permits from the Regional Water Quality Control Board, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. If threatened or endangered species, such as steelhead trout or red-legged frogs, are present, permits must also be obtained from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Burying creeks in culverts, or even confining them between steep concrete banks, a common practice until the 1970s, has become increasingly rare as developers realize that open

conservation areas yield added value to their developments.¹³ Left mostly undisturbed, however, these wetlands are no less artificial as creations than the public urban gardens which preceded them as landscape features in residential developments. Both are contrivances largely separated from the larger physical continuum to which they formerly belonged.

Critical Context

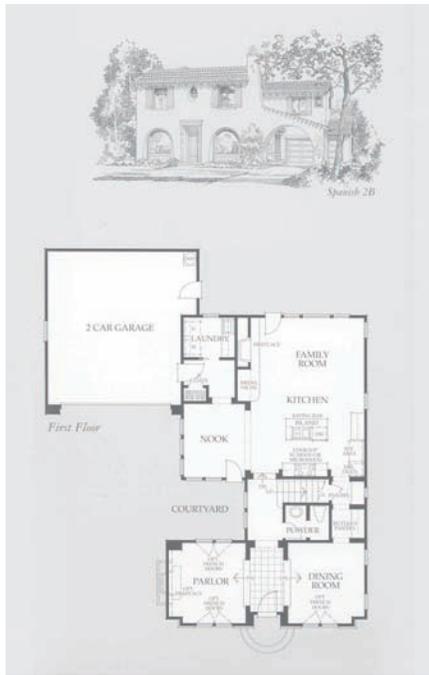
There are certainly problems with the design of these developments, and it is important to note them here. While residents confronted with their newness might find comfort in the traditional styles and evocations of familiar places suggested by the architecture, both Dougherty Valley and Canyon Lakes fail to establish connections through design elements to their most significant asset, their proximity to vast areas of outdoor space. Houses featuring unusually narrow, vestigial porches may trigger memories, but

they fail to respond to features such as creeks or hills or allow for genuine porch activity. House plans are similarly unadjusted to varying site conditions, such as corner locations or adjacency to a community square.

Facades in Georgian, Spanish or Tuscan style have narrow windows rather than larger panes of glass that would establish better visual connections to the surrounding landscape. Some design decisions are commendable—for example, portecochères that limit the typical suburban effect of street fronts composed mostly of garage doors. But others are regrettable, such as the excessive compartmentalization of house plans into numerous small rooms that fail to develop an easy flow from one to another, and from inside to outside.

In terms of siting, ecologists maintain that the scale of conservation efforts in these developments is insufficient and their locations too sporadic to mitigate the effects of expanding human settlements. Other critics complain that the cost of extending infrastructure farther into the hinterlands to facilitate the development of outlying areas is prohibitively high.

Meanwhile, the intensive use of cars to commute to and from places like the Dougherty Valley increases the demand for oil and contributes to the deterioration of air quality. But as long as Americans continue to enjoy the freedom of movement afforded by automobiles, and prefer to live in single-family houses, the solution to these problems will probably involve incremental rather than radical change in housing design and a combination of cars that consume less gasoline, or employ other types of fuel, with better traffic-flow devices. It has yet to be demonstrated that fixed-rail transit networks or other forms of public transportation can satisfactorily



address the basic needs of relatively low-density communities, even if funds were available to build them.

Likewise, suburban cul-de-sacs are often blamed for creating traffic congestion by limiting connections between suburban neighborhoods. But in the Dougherty Valley they are valued as enclosed, protected environments for children’s play. Indeed, streets often continue beyond the point where cars are confronted with bollards.

Social critics also point out that while developments like the Dougherty Valley contain subdivisions that target a fairly wide variety of income groups, they remain racially segregated. The developer’s advertising campaign is, indeed, aimed at whites and Asians, but not blacks. But such social segregation is ensured by the mere fact that even affordable subsidized houses are still priced at the median cost of a Northern California home. And even some of the largest and densest American cities remain

racially segregated—Chicago, for example. Suburbs are not the cause of segregation; cultural and social factors, rather than lower-density development patterns, per se, account for the physical aspects of racial division.

Finally, it should be noted that the Dougherty Valley developments have close affinities with principles expounded by the New Urbanism. These encourage the design of suburban communities modeled on the layouts of small towns as they existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the changes to contemporary suburbs advocated by the New Urbanists are increased opportunities for pedestrian movement; the creation of town centers and houses with porches rather than garages facing the street; the replacement of suburban cul-de-sacs with a gridded town plan and streets directly connected to one another; more parks of various sizes from tot lots to village commons; community gardens

distributed throughout the community; and open-space conservation areas with greenbelts that define and connect neighborhoods and districts.

The Dougherty Valley developments have also adopted some of the environmental strategies promoted by the ecological movement. One of its earlier high water marks was Village Homes, in nearby Davis. This remarkable 1970s development featured shared yards and a common, and also served as a laboratory for experiments in solar-energy technology, neighborhood agriculture, and natural drainage.

Opposite: Grading for a development in the Dougherty Valley.

Above: Suburban house plans still trade on traditional styles and evocations without establishing real connections through design elements to nearby outdoor spaces; Pellicia plan, Gale Ranch, Dougherty Valley (left); shallow, vestigial porch in Dougherty Valley (right).

Ordinariness Reexamined

The Dougherty Valley is not a perfect model community: it is not a built manifesto, the expression of a radical new way of living, or an alternative proposal based on reuse of existing infrastructure.¹⁴ Neither is it a one-off demonstration project such as Seaside, Florida, or Village Homes. It makes no claims beyond the typically exaggerated commercial market-pitch to potential customers.

The importance of the Dougherty Valley developments lies rather in its ordinariness, which suggests that subdivision improvements have become commonplace. The incremental progress they have achieved toward the amelioration of the environmental damage caused by their predecessors goes some way toward refuting the widely shared belief that suburban subdivisions are inherently devoid of local character. This is a characterization that, in the case of the Dougherty Valley, constitutes a misleading oversimplification.

Notes

1. See Stanford Kwinter, "Generica," in *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2000), p. 525; or see Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998).
2. See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 8-9; and *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch*, ed. by Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 517.
3. See Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), p. XII; and Margaret Crawford, "Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles," *JAE* (Sept. 1995). See also Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and the chapters by Mike Davis and Michael Sorkin, in Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park*. The latter claims that the contemporary city "eradicates genuine particularity in favor of a continuous urban field, a

conceptual grid of boundless reach."

A great number of authors have denounced the uniformity of the American suburban landscape, its lack of identity, and its placelessness. See, for example, E.C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), p. 78; or Michael Hough, *Out of Place: Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), especially the chapter titled "Urban Region and the Loss of Identity."

4. See Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995).
5. See Stanley Buder, *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Geoffrey Peter Hall, *Sociable Cities: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard* (New York: J. Wiley, 1998); and Clarence Stein, *Towards New Towns for America* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1957). The latter is an important account of his and Henry Wright's experiences and thoughts in planning new towns. See also "Peachtree City at 45," in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 18, 2004.
6. Among the major pieces of legislation were the National Environmental Policy Act of 1971, the Water Pollution Act and the Coastal Zone Management Act (or "wetlands" act) of 1972, the Endangered Species Act and the Flood Disaster Protection Act of 1973, the Clean Water Act of 1977, and the Water Quality Act of 1987.
7. See Richard Weinstein, "The First American City," in J. Allen Scott, and W. Edward Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 30.
8. Two major companies, SBC (ex-PacBell) and Chevron/Texaco, are in the area. There are also two equidistant large business areas: Hacienda, in Pleasanton, and Bishop Ranch, in San Ramon. Doug Dahlin, principal of Dahlin Group design firm, in San Ramon, California, was most helpful in providing general information on developments in the area during a personal interview in January 2004.
9. See "Dougherty Valley Information," available from the City of San Ramon, at www.ci.san-ramon.ca.us/plan/images/DVInfoJuly2005.pdf.
10. See Dougherty Valley Specific Plan, adopted by the Contra Costa County Supervisors, November 19, 1996.
11. Information on the landscaping of Dougherty

Valley was obtained from a personal interview with John Nicol (John Nicol and Associates, Landscape Architects) in January 2004. Also see Linda Davis's article in the *Contra Costa Times*, "Long-Planned Dougherty Valley past the Contra Costa county board of supervisors on November becomes reality," posted on the Web on Tues., Oct. 1, 2002.

12. Personal interview with Malcolm Sproul, principal, LSA Associates, Inc., March 2004. According to Sproul, the wetlands area between Gale Ranch and Windermere leaves ample land for habitat to thrive. But this is not the case in other areas where the development encroaches (as in the southern areas), necessitating mitigation work.
13. See Susan Schwartz, "A Meandering History of Bay Area Creek Restoration," in *The Yodeler*, a publication of the Sierra Club (San Francisco Bay Chapter of the Sierra Club, July 2000).
14. Dolores Hayden, in *Building Suburbia* (New York: Pantheon Books 2003), p. 232, contends that reinvesting in the old decaying suburbs rather than new growth would make better sense than investing in outlying areas. She also acknowledges, however, that to accomplish this, the entire structure of tax subsidies for fringe growth would have to be redirected. For a discussion on segregation, see, for example, Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 231. In *The Limitless City* (Washington: Island Press, 2002), Oliver Gillham provides a well-balanced report on both sides of the debate on sprawl and suburbanization, including issues such as pollution, infrastructure costs, and conservation of rural lands. A discussion on the costs of infrastructure development in urban and suburban communities can be found on p. 125.

All photos are by the author.